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THE 'GOOD' UNIVERSITY TEACHER AS PERCEIVED BY THE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

A sample of 176 second year University of Zimbabwe students was asked to select the three most important characteristics of a 'good' teacher from fifteen characteristics presented to them. It was shown that students attached great importance to the teacher's ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity and transmit knowledge, rather than according to the university criteria of research and publication. Results were also analysed according to faculty and no significant differences were found among the four groups of students in terms of their choices of the three characteristics.

The concepts 'good' teacher, lecturer, instructor and professor are used interchangeably in this paper.

Introduction

One of the problems which has generated interest in higher education is the definition of the characteristics of effective university instruction. Today, many universities are involving students in the decision-making processes which are part of the academic life of a university as well as considering students' impressions on the quality of instruction and the teacher. As Grush and Costin (1975) rightly point out, since students are the sole consumers of instructional services, their judgements should be the only determinants in defining the important variables of a 'good' teacher.

Many studies carried out in various universities in the United States have shown the difficulty in extracting characteristics of a good teacher from student evaluations (Miron & Segal, 1978). While most students will remember great teachers and can list their characteristics, when two or more of them are asked to rate the same teacher using the same criteria, they often do not agree on their evaluation (Phoham, 1993). There seems to be no clear definition of a good teacher. The absence of such a clear definition of a "good instructor" is not only prevalent in higher education but is also found at all levels as noted by Ryans (1960) and Dunkin and Biddle (1974).

Miron and Segal (1978) point out that there are two main categories into which literature dealing with the nature of effective instruction can be classified. Firstly, there is literature which focuses on values, personality, and the emotional aspects of instruction and the teacher. According to Ryans (1960) the teacher's behaviour is seen as a function of his personality. He must arouse in the student, positive emotional responses towards learning (Mourer, 1960). Crawford and Bradshaw (1968), Grush and Costin (1975) hold that a teacher must provide students with tools for making emotional adjustments and he is expected to act in a friendly manner, to be enthusiastic, flexible and willing to help. He should be responsible and concerned with the welfare of his students both socially and academically (Farrant, 1988).

The second category is the cognitive aspect of instruction. French (1957); Eble (1971); Gadzella (1968); and Musella and Rusch (1968) view a good teacher as someone with the following characteristics; he must arouse interest in students, communicate ideas in an organised manner, must motivate students towards achievement, and help them develop skills and thinking processes. Avenant (1990) maintains that a good teacher should be a person who is capable of motivating pupils into cooperation. He gives detailed lesson plans with a variety of activities. He must be able to use time effectively and efficiently with most time being spent on instruction and task (Reed & Bergemann, 1995).

Miron and Segal (1978) carried out a study which dealt with students' conception of the characteristics of a good teacher, while taking into consideration the department they were enrolled in. The results showed that when given 15 characteristics of a good teacher, the students attached relatively greater importance to characteristics related to method of instruction and presentation in class. The three qualities with the highest frequency of being chosen were as follows:

- (1) Interesting presentation of lecture material. This characteristic had 18.7% of all choices;
- (2) Preparation and organisation of lessons scored (14,3%); and
- (3) Lucid expression of ideas had a total of 14,1%.

Other characteristics like developing thinking process, ability to encourage intellectual curiosity and developing student motivation were chosen at a relatively lower frequency. According to Miron and Segal, this shows that students expect a good university professor to be able to foster intellectual growth and motivation.

Elmore and La Pointe (1975) maintain that other instructor characteristics such as warmth, seem to have more impact. For instance, Murray (1973) carried out an experiment in which thirty-six faculty members in the department of psychology were evaluated by their peers on 20 personality traits on teacher effectiveness. The results showed that warmth correlated .56 with student ratings of teaching effectiveness. This finding was further supported by Elmore and La Pointe's research in which it was found out that when students rate their instructor's interest and warmth, teachers perceived as warmer or primarily interested in students, receive higher ratings in effectiveness regardless of their sex. Hence, La Pointe and Elmore concluded that warmth was an important variable that influenced student ratings of teacher effectiveness in a variety of courses and departments. Spady (1973) found the following components which he regarded as important for teacher effectiveness;

1. subject matter,

2. pedagogy,
3. enthusiasm, and
4. empathy

The Study

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the University of Zimbabwe students' conception of a good university teacher. What qualities should a good teacher have so as to be considered good? The study, therefore, deals with the students' conception of the characteristics of the good teacher while taking into consideration the university department in which he is enrolled. In the study, it is assumed that there would be differences depending on this factor, that students studying in the various disciplines would have varying conceptions of the teacher.

In investigating various characteristics of a good university teacher, the study endeavours to throw light on the university teacher with respect to various aspects such as: scholarship, delivery, advising (Dressel, 1970) and personal traits.

Method

Sample

The sample under study consisted of 176 undergraduate students in various departments at the University of Zimbabwe. The students who took part in the study were second year students from the faculties of Education, Arts, Social Studies, Veterinary Science, Engineering and Commerce.

Instrument

Fifteen characteristics of a good teacher were presented in a questionnaire. Students were asked to choose the three most important ones. The characteristics listed were related to the following four aspects:

- (1) Scholarship -teacher's research ability and knowledge;

- (2) Delivery -presentation and organisation of lessons, and interesting presentation of material development of student motivation;
- (3) Advising -student/teacher interaction, willingness to help, and friendly relationship;
- (4) Teachers' personal traits – a sense of humour, external appearance, and fluency of speech (Miron & Segal, 1978).

The list of traits appearing on the questionnaire was partially based on the literature surveyed in this article, and partially on student "reactions" to an "open" evaluating instrument developed by lecturers of the Department of Educational Foundations consisting of 21 questions relating to teacher behaviour and the courses undertaken by the students. The questions were rated on a 5 point Likert Scale ranging from poor (1) to excellent (5).

Reliability

Using Cronbach's alpha on the 14 questions relating to teacher behaviour, a reliability co-efficient of 0,82 was found while the 7 course questions yielded Cronbach's alpha of 0,85 (Zindi, 1997).

Results

Table 1

Distribution of Choices of Good Teacher Characteristics

Characteristic	Frequency (N)	Frequency (%)
1. Ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity	82	15.5
2. Knowledge of material	71	13.4
3. Preparation and organisation of lessons	67	12.7
4. Interesting presentation of material	46	8.7
5. Willingness to help	39	7.4
6. Attention to student feedback	34	6.4
7. Fluency of speech	33	6.2
8. Friendly approach	31	5.9
9. Develops motivation	28	5.3
10. Flexibility	22	4.2
11. Research ability	22	4.2
12. Sense of humour	20	3.9
13. Lucid expression of ideas	16	3.0
14. Develops thought processes	16	3.0
15. External appearance	1	0.2
Total	528*	100

*The number refers to the number of choices and not to the number of subjects.

Students' conceptions of a good university teacher are shown in Table 1. The three characteristics which received the highest number of choices were:

1. ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity scored 15.5 % of all choices;
2. knowledge of material scored 13.4%; and
3. preparation and organisation of lessons scored 12.7%.

Additional characteristics mentioned often were interesting presentation of lecture material, willingness to help, and paying attention to student feedback. Although these characteristics were chosen at a relatively lower frequency, it shows that to a certain extent, students expect that a good university lecturer will be able to present lecture material in an interesting manner, be willing to help as well as give students some feedback on their performance.

The characteristics which received the lowest frequency were, lucid expression of ideas (3%); develops thought process (3%), and external appearance (2%). These results clearly show that students did not attach great importance to these characteristics.

Table 2
Distribution of the Choices of Good Teacher Characteristics
by Faculty

Characteristics	S. Studies		V. Sci, Eng Science		Arts and Education		Commerce, Bus. Studies	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity	30	17.5	31	16.1	15	11.6	6	16.6
2. Knowledge of material	16	9.4	33	17.2		19	14.7	38.3
3. Preparation and organisation of lessons	23	13.5	24	12.5	14	10.8	6	16.6
4. Interesting presentation of material	17	9.9	21	10.9	6	4.7	2	5.6
5. Willingness to help	15	8.8	13	6.7	7	5.4	4	11.1
6. Attention to student feedback	13	7.6	5	2.6	13	10.1	3	8.3
7. Fluency of speech	9	5.3	18	9.4	5	3.9	1	2.8
8. Friendly approach	42.3	13	6.7	11	8.5	3	8.3	
9. Develops motivation	12	7.0	7	3.5	7	5.4	2	5.6
10. Flexibility	9	5.3	7	3.5	5	3.9	1	2.8
11. Research ability	7	4.1	1	0.5	13	10.1	1	2.8
12. Sense of humour	6	3.5	10	5.2	2	1.6	2	5.6
13. Lucid expression of ideas	5	2.9	6	3.1	5	3.9	0	0
14. Develops thought process	4	2.3	4	2.1	7	5.4	2	5.6
15. External appearance	1	0.6	0	0	0	0	0	0
	171	100	192	100	129	100	36	100

Table II shows the results of a "good university teacher" by faculty. For the purpose of comparison, these disciplines were grouped into four categories as follows:

1. Social Studies;
2. Veterinary Science, Engineering, and Science;
3. Arts and Education; and
4. Commerce

Although these categories were rather too broad, analysis of the results can be justified on the ground that the grouping was based on the proximity between the various disciplines. Findings show that the choices made by each group on the characteristics of a good teacher were almost similar to those of the whole sample except on the order of preference. Characteristics which received the highest number of choices for Veterinary Science, Science, and Engineering, Arts and Education, and Commerce were the same as in Table I. These are ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity, knowledge of material and preparation, and organisation of lessons. The order of preference, however, differed. The choices of Veterinary Science, Engineering and Science correspond to those of Arts and Education students. The three traits chosen with greater frequency by these groups were:

- (1) Knowledge of material;
- (2) Ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity; and
- (3) Preparation and organisation of lessons

The Social Studies group chose the following, with relatively greater frequency:

- (1) Ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity;
- (2) Preparation and organisation of lessons; and
- (3) Interesting presentation of material.

The Commerce group chose ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity and preparation and organisation of lessons, with the highest and equal frequency of 16,6%. The second choice fell on three characteristics which received the second highest frequency. These were knowledge of material, attention to student feedback, and friendly approach.

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings reveal that University of Zimbabwe students view a good teacher as someone with a good academic status, who has an ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity, and is able to prepare and organise his/her lessons well. These characteristics fall under the two categories of scholarship and delivery. These findings, however, conflict with those of Miron and Segal's (1978)

results. The Tel-Aviv students viewed a good university teacher as someone who is capable of communicating material in an organised, lucid, and interesting manner. The University of Zimbabwe students, however, agree with the Tel-Aviv students on preparation and organisation of lessons as one of the important characteristics of a good teacher. Findings also show that interesting presentation of material and lucid expression of ideas are considered important by Tel - Aviv students while the same characteristics are viewed less important by the University of Zimbabwe students.

In this study, there was a high degree of agreement on the characteristics of a good university teacher among students from various faculties. The three groups namely (1) Veterinary Science, Engineering, Science, (2) Arts and Education, and (3) Commerce, chose ability to stimulate intellectual curiosity, knowledge of material, and preparation and organisation of lessons to be important characteristics of a good teacher. The Social Studies group chose interesting presentation of material to be more important. This clearly demonstrates that the University of Zimbabwe undergraduates' expectations of a good university teacher are almost identical. The characteristics also agree with the University expectations of a good teacher. They all fall under the teaching category

(University of Zimbabwe 1996/97 Calendar). An agreement, therefore exists to a certain extent between the university established conception of a good teacher and the student's conception. Students, however, do not agree that a good university teacher should have some research ability which is one of the university's conceptions of a good university teacher.

The findings of this study, like those of Miron and Segal's (1978), do not tally with those of Crawford and Bradshaw (1968) or Grush and Costin (1975) who found that students rate the teachers' personal traits high, as well as those traits which are connected with advising of students.

The findings of the present study may serve to stimulate debate with regard to University promotion based on achievement in research and lack of deep appreciation of good teaching.

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